

Veterans' Benefits

The VFW's Concerns:

Toxic exposures during military service, including open air burn pits, have caused invisible, but grave health complications for our nation's service members, past and present. These health hazards appear to be so widespread that "toxic exposure" has now become synonymous with "military service," which will likely negatively impact recruiting goals and the strength of our military. Congress has established streamlined options for certain veterans who suffer from these conditions, such as Gulf War Illness, to receive benefits. However, the current structure for recognizing the health effects of new exposures, or adding health conditions to known exposures such as Agent Orange, makes it difficult for veterans to prove that their health conditions are related to military service. A permanent comprehensive and evidence-based framework is necessary to improve the current practice of requesting congressional intervention every time a new toxic exposure is identified.

Through a partnership with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has determined that 14 diseases are associated with exposure to Agent Orange. The National Academies have also found an association between exposure to Agent Orange and additional diseases, including bladder cancer, hypertension, hypothyroidism, and parkinsonism. However, VA has refused to add these diseases to the list of conditions presumed to be associated with Agent Orange exposure. Thus, it is nearly impossible for veterans who are suffering from these life-threatening conditions to receive benefits.

A large number of service members are returning home from combat with injuries related to blast exposures. Many of these service members go untreated for blast injuries while in service, which makes it difficult to prove that these conditions were caused by an event during service. VA has been slow to provide a long-term solution that would address blast injuries, despite the overwhelming evidence that suggests service members who were exposed to explosions or sustained concussions often experience delayed onset of symptoms ranging from headaches and cognitive impairments to more severe neurological complications.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass legislation to establish an independent commission to identify known and future toxic exposures and recommend new studies; require VA to enter into an agreement with the National Academies to evaluate scientific evidence regarding diseases associated with toxic exposures; and require VA to grant a presumption of service-connection for the diseases identified.
- Pass H.R. 5610, *Fair Care for Vietnam Veterans Act*, which would add bladder cancer, hypertension, hypothyroidism, and parkinsonism to the list of presumptive conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange.
- Pass H.R. 5739, *Blast Exposure Protection Act of 2020*, which would establish a presumption of service-connection for disabilities associated with blast exposures.